

Matthew 1:1-17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 1 verses 1 to 17 The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, and Ram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nashon, and Nashon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram and Joram the father of Uzziah Uzziah the father of Jotham and Jotham the father of Ahaz and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh and Manasseh the father of Amos and Amos the father of

Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the deportation to Babylon. And after the deportation to Babylon, Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiad, and Abiad the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliad, and Eliad the father of Eliezer, and Eliezer the father of Mathan, and Mathan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.

So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ, fourteen generations. Matthew 1, the first chapter of the first book of the New Testament, begins in a surprising way. We might think that moving into the books of the New Testament, we get away from the most boring parts of the Old Testament, which are the genealogies. But lo and behold, the first book of the New Testament begins with a genealogy. Genealogies may seem like bare and boring lists of names to us, but within scripture they serve a multitude of different purposes.

They establish the pedigree of certain office holders. They present historical transitions between blocks of narrative. They serve to mark out families and the way that they have expanded, and particular lines are developed. They manifest some of the patterns in history, and the larger arcs of God's work over the course of many centuries. They can present that history in a nutshell, bringing to mind the broader structure of the story without going into every single detail.

And they also conserve the purpose of bringing to mind certain features of the past, certain characters from the past that are salient in understanding present characters. All of these things, to some extent or other, are taking place in Matthew chapter 1. Matthew is connecting the story that he is telling with a story that he is telling with a story that he is telling with a story that he is telling with a story that the Old Testament tells, brought to its proper culmination and climax. His genealogy establishes Jesus' pedigree. It connects Jesus with David as David's true heir. It connects Jesus with Abraham as his true son.

[3 : 47] It tells the story of the Old Testament in a way that helps us to see the larger pattern and flow of that story, and the way that Christ might relate to that. It's introduced with the expression, the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ. Now, this could be read, and many have read it as the book of the genesis of Jesus Christ, and I don't think that's an accident. It draws our mind back to the very beginning of scripture, in that book where there is a lot of emphasis upon genealogies. Also, as in some of the other gospels, it highlights the fact that Jesus is the alpha. He's the beginning. He's the one who starts all these things off. He's the one who's with God before the creation. He's the one who is at the very dawn and the first stirrings of Israel's history and story. He is connected with that part of the story. And so, as we look all the way back to Genesis, we should be able to see Christ there, and telling the story in a way that starts at that point. It helps us to recognize just how firmly rooted Christ is within the story of Israel and the story of the creation as a whole.

Matthew does not just begin with the book of Genesis. He ends with a reference back to the final verse of the Old Testament in its Hebrew ordering, which is 2 Chronicles chapter 36, verse 23.

Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia, the Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him. Let him go up. It's the great commission of the Old Testament. And what Matthew is doing here is telling his story in a way that is sandwiched by the first verse of the Old Testament, in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and the last verse of the Old Testament, the verse that speaks of Cyrus's decree. Christ sums up that entire story in himself. Christ is playing out the story of scripture himself. Christ is the new Israel.

Christ is the one who takes all history into himself. It's a bookended narrative from Genesis to Chronicles, from the beginning to the end, and Christ is the one who holds everything together.

It's also like a new book of Chronicles. The book of Chronicles begins with the very beginning, with Adam and God's creation of Adam, and then it moves into a focus upon the genealogy of Abraham and of David. And that's what Matthew is doing here. He's connecting Christ with that very beginning of the book of Chronicles, and he seems to depend upon the book of Chronicles for certain parts of his genealogy, and moving in his story to the very end of the book of Chronicles, as Christ fulfills a new great commission, a commission that's greater than that even of Cyrus. In beginning his gospel in such a way then, he presents the story as being continued in Christ, as being summed up in Christ, and suggests that the story of the gospel must be anchored in what has gone before. By beginning his gospel in this way, he gives us a sense of just how auspicious these events are, how significant these stirrings in Bethlehem and Nazareth actually are. In contrast to Luke and Greco-Roman genealogies, but like the Old Testament, Matthew works forward, starting with the most ancient figure and then moving forward to the most contemporary. It ends with the most important name though. Part of this demonstrates the proper lineage of Christ, connects Christ with previous characters, and we might also see it as something that could have been substantiated by genealogical records of important figures kept in the temple, where they could be checked prior to the destruction of the temple in AD 70. It begins with

[7 : 50] Abraham, who's mentioned seven times in the book of Matthew, and there's a neat transition between the heading of the book and the genealogy. It's the book of the Genesis of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham, and then Abraham was the father of Isaac. So it leads very neatly into that list.

It isn't just a list of names though. There are people mentioned within it who are not strictly part of the genealogy itself. People like Zerah, or people like Uriah, or the brothers of Judah or Jeconiah.

Likewise, women did not need to be recorded in the list, but they are recorded, and they're not necessarily the ones that you would expect. If you are going to make a list of the women that are important within the Old Testament, you may think of the great matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, etc. And yet that's not what we see here. We see characters like Tamar, we see Rahab, we see Bathsheba, we see Ruth. These are figures who are outsiders who come in. Bathsheba is associated with Uriah the Hittite, and Rahab is a person of Jericho. Ruth is a Moabites, and Tamar is presumably a Canaanite. All of these figures are Gentiles who are brought in, and within the Gospel of Matthew, this is something that Matthew wants us to see, that the people of God have always included Gentiles to some extent. But this is just preparing for the greater inclusion of the Gentiles that will occur through the ministry of Christ. It's also preparing the way for Mary. Mary is someone who gives birth to

Christ in an unusual manner, and all these unusual women who have come into the story in surprising ways maybe prepare us for her and what she does. The names mentioned are sometimes different from the names that we found elsewhere. So the Septuagint of 1 Chronicles 2 9 has Aram rather than Ram, and here we have Aram rather than Ram, although the ESV changes it to Ram. Amos instead of Amon, and Asaph instead of Asa.

In Jeremiah chapter 22 verse 30, there is a curse upon Jehoiachin, or Jeconiah, or Caniah, by Jeremiah. Neither Jehoiachin's descendants would sit upon the throne. Thus says the Lord, write this man down as childless, a man who shall not succeed in his days, for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David and ruling again in Judah. So it seems strange that he's mentioned on the list here.

[10 : 30] James Bajon has suggested that Shealtiel is adopted by Jehoiachin, or that new life is breathed into the cursed line by taking in this child from without. And so he's protected from the judgment by means of adoption. There are three sets of 14, and 14 is an important number. It's the gematria of David's name. David frames the genealogy. Not surprisingly, because Christ is the son of David.

He is the greater David. 14, of course, is seven times two. There are 14 years from Ishmael to Isaac. There are 14 years serving for Rachel and Leah. There are 14 years of plenty followed by famine.

But it is also a pattern associated with the moon. There's a pattern of waxing and waning. So the genealogy waxes from Abraham to David. Then it wanes from David to the deportation to Babylon.

And then it waxes again as Jeconiah is given new life through Shealtiel. And then it leads finally to Christ, who comes at the climax of this second great waxing of Israel's history.

42 is also six sevens. Christ is the one who brings in the seventh seven. The seventh seven being associated with Jubilee and the arrival of that time. It's also a time, times and half a time.

[11 : 54] As in 12 months plus 24 months, two years, two times. And half a time, six months. It makes 42 months. Perhaps we're supposed to see Israel's history to this point as a sort of testing that leads to the deliverance of Christ's arrival. Jesus comes at the fullness of time. He's the one who completes this genealogy, who brings it to its destiny, who completes the movement started in Abraham to David, that first great waxing of Israel's history, and brings it into a second great waxing. He is the son of Abraham. He's the son of David. He's also the son, more directly, of Joseph, the son of Jacob.

Now we've already met a Joseph, the son of Jacob, in the book of Genesis, and we'll see similarities between these two characters as we go on. But for now, we should note the fact that Jesus is given to a father, not just to a mother. He is born to a betrothed couple, so that he would be raised by that couple, so that he would have as his father, Joseph, and all that Joseph's genealogy gives him.

This is part of what gives him the foundation of his title as the Messiah, that through Joseph, he's descended from Abraham and David. Now he's not biologically the son of Joseph, but as in the case of Jeconiah, there is an adoption here, as it were. But he is given to Joseph that Joseph might raise him as his own. And the story of Matthew focuses on Joseph in its nativity account, which should serve as a caution against marginalising or downplaying the importance of Joseph as a figure within the story of Christ. A question to consider. In the way that Matthew structures this genealogy, he is able to pick out certain characters that stand out from the rest, characters that are either paralleled with others, characters that need not be mentioned, but are mentioned, characters that are repeated or present in particular moments, characters that frame the entire genealogy, and characters that are present within the genealogy in other structural forms. What characters do you see Matthew particularly highlighting? How is he highlighting them? And how does their connection with Jesus and his genealogy help us to understand who Jesus is when he comes on the scene?